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# POISON AND PLAGUE

## RUSSIA'S SECRET TERROR WEAPONS

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In October 1980 and August 1981, Jane Hamilton-Merritt documented for Reader's Digest the use of poison gas by the Soviet-supplied Vietnamese and Pathet Lao against anti-Communist H'mong tribesmen in Laos. The gassings have continued—and spread. In this exclusive account, investigative reporters Jack Anderson and Dale Van Atta reveal top-secret intelligence on the widespread proliferation of Soviet chemical and biological weaponry—and the growing threat it poses to America.

**F**OUR YEARS AGO, Jose Romero\* escaped from Cuba with secret knowledge of a development so terrifying that it could surpass the Cuban missile crisis in portent. Here are the stark details he related to the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA):

In the 1960s Romero studied chemistry at a college near Havana. Later he was enrolled in a special army school at Limonar in Matanzas Province and trained by Soviet instructors as a chemical and biological warfare (CBW) adviser to Fidel Castro's army.

The Russians taught him that bacteria produced by rats, flies and other organisms could be introduced into an enemy's atmosphere or water supply. Romero said he had been shown pictures of U.S. cities that were "possible chemical and biological weapons targets." One Soviet briefing claimed that a deadly toxin strategically released in Mississippi "could contaminate a third of the United States."

Romero's story is verified by other sources, including a former interpreter for Castro. Both defectors have described Soviet chemical units and underground-storage sites, some so sensitive that they were

protected by surface-to-air missiles. These facilities, one defector warned, are "part of a chemical and biological strategic system developed by the Soviets and more dangerous than anyone in the United States can realize."

"Silent Killer." Meanwhile, reports had been reaching DIA headquarters revealing that the Soviets were putting into practice in Asia what they had been preaching in Cuba's CBW schools. In March 1981 a Thai citizen died from poison placed in drinking water by Vietnamese troops near the Kampuchean border. Others bled profusely from the nose and mouth. Two months later, Thai soldiers captured two Vietnamese trying to poison the water supply in a Kampuchean relocation camp in Thailand.

From Afghanistan came one horrifying report after another of poisonings and gassings. A favorite Soviet practice: pouring deadly chemicals into the guerrillas' *kar-ezes* (underground canals used primarily for irrigation).

Victims of the Soviet-made chemical and biological agents have included Lao hill tribesmen, Kampuchean resistance fighters, Afghan

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\*Not his real name.

*mujahedin*, Thai soldiers, Iranian revolutionary guards, Chinese soldiers, even civilians in the Soviet Union. A realistic estimate puts those killed at more than 30,000.

Descriptions of the slaughter are horrendous. The biologically produced poison that has come to be called "yellow rain" causes its victims to bleed through nearly every body orifice, including ears and eyes. Soviet nerve gases cause a terrible dance of death: breathing difficulty, sweating, nausea, vomiting, cramps, involuntary defecation and urination, jerking and staggering. Finally, the victims collapse in convulsions, succumbing then to complete paralysis and asphyxiation. One chemical agent used in Afghanistan causes corpses to bloat abnormally, the skin turning black and flaking away from the bones in less than a day.

Only one new Soviet agent seems relatively merciful—an unidentified substance nicknamed "The Silent Killer." Spread by Soviet troops in the eastern and northeastern provinces of Afghanistan since mid-1981, it is so swift that victims die as if frozen in place.

**Blue Ears.** Soviet deployment of chemical and biological weapons is by no means a recent phenomenon. Red Army troops captured by the Germans during World War II told of an extensive Soviet program beginning in 1939, including development of a "powdery yellow-brown" agent called lebeda that could be sprayed from aircraft. A Soviet scientist who defected in the 1950s reported that political prisoners were fed toxic material in ground meat; then were closely monitored for reactions. A more recent Soviet defector revealed that the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Ministry of Defense both specifically approved research into psychochemicals and biological toxins.

But certain intelligence analysts were so committed to the continuance of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention that prohibited development, production and stockpiling of these materials, that they at first gave little credence to any report suggesting that the Soviets were cheating.

All this changed in 1979, when a massive explosion rocked the area

around a secret Soviet installation at Sverdlovsk in the Ural Mountains. Within four days the first seven or eight victims were admitted to a local hospital, choking, with high fever, blue ears and lips, and breathing difficulties. Each died within six to seven hours, and autopsies revealed severe pulmonary edema and blood poisoning. Soon victims were collapsing throughout the region. By the time the epidemic had run its course two months later, up to 1000 people had died.

Not until the following April did President Carter receive the unequivocal report of "strong evidence that a biological production or storage site is at the Sverdlovsk facility. It shows an extremely large number of anthrax spores were released—effectively negating any assessment of peaceful or defensive research being conducted there. This flies in the face of the 1972 convention."

Since then, intelligence has identified another "major BW-related research and production installation" at Zagorsk, six more suspected sites—at Omutninsk, Aksu, Pokrov, Berdsk, Penza and Kurgan—and a storage facility in the town of Malta. A secret report reveals that the "offensive BW program" is run by a "covert apparatus" within the Ministry of Defense called the Seventh Main Directorate.

**Eroding a Theory.** Governmental foot-dragging also prevailed in the investigation of "yellow rain" gassings of H'mong people in Laos. The gassings appeared to be retribution against the tribe, which had fought for the United States against the Communists in Laos until the American withdrawal in April 1975. The earliest known chemical attack occurred in the summer of 1975. But it took four years—until September 1979—before a competent U.S. medical team was dispatched to Thailand to investigate. By that time at least 4596 H'mong had been killed with deadly biochemical weapons, according to U.S. estimates.

Even then, however, eyewitness reports weren't enough for the analysts. Among the literally millions of hours of intercepted communications it routinely records, the Na-

tional Security Agency found the key pieces of the Laotian puzzle. One piece revealed that a Laotian-army chemical unit in Xiangkhoang expected a visit by a Soviet military team on February 7, 1979, and prepared Soviet-manufactured chemical items for their inspection. Another revealed that a Soviet team of seven chemical-artillery experts was scheduled to inspect chemical supplies at a Savannakhet storage facility the following June. A third indicated the Soviets would be looking over the same chemical agents used against the H'mong.

Finally, on February 2, 1982, six years after the attacks began, an interagency intelligence report concluded that the Soviets were directing chemical-weapons training, storage and use by the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces in Laos and Kampuchea. It also charged the Soviets with using lethal chemicals in Afghanistan.

One aspect of the attacks was unexplained: what was the killing agent in "yellow rain"? Journalist Sterling Seagrave, later the author of *Yellow Rain*, and Army medical-intelligence specialist Sharon Watson discovered that peasants killed by a fungal poison in the Orenburg district of Russia during World War II exhibited many of the same symptoms as those who died decades later in Laos. More than 30,000 Russians perished of a trichothecene toxin (T2) in that epidemic, which resulted from fungal-contaminated millet, wheat and barley. Starving peasants baked it in bread. Tests since 1981 have identified unnatural levels of T2 and other trichothecene toxins at attack sites in Laos and Kampuchea.

The most vocal critic of this evidence, Harvard biochemist Matthew Meselson, argued that the yellow-rain poisons are produced in nature by fungi on the feces of bees. That theory eroded in May when two leading Canadian scientists reported that fungi collected in Thailand show little or no ability to produce yellow-rain poisons. Rutgers University scientist Joseph D. Rosen analyzed yellow-rain samples and found not only fungal poisons but a man-made chemical

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(polyethylene glycol) that could not possibly have been produced naturally. Asks Rep. Jim Leach (R., Iowa), one of Congress's top CBW experts: "How can the bee-excrement theorists explain how thousands of people have died from a bee-borne plague where no history of such plagues has ever been recorded, where the geography is so diverse, ranging from the arid mountains of Afghanistan to the jungle plateaus of Cambodia to the semi-tropical mountains of Laos?"

**New Threats.** Although there has been a marked decline in the use of CBW weapons since early 1983, U.S. Ambassador Eugene Douglas, the coordinator for refugee affairs who helped bring "yellow rain" to world attention, fears that the decline represents only a temporary lull as the Soviets prepare to test a new group of horror weapons. Indeed, President Reagan received an alarming report from the CIA earlier this year about biological-warfare possibilities of Soviet gene-splicing techniques. A secret program directed by Gen. V. I. Ogarkov is utilizing recent advances in biotechnology to produce toxins more potent than ever before. The report estimated that Soviet military biotech research could field such weapons in three to five years.

Intelligence agencies acknowledge another threat: the Soviets have tailored one of their strategic rockets for delivering chemical or biological weapons to America. It is the Mod 4 variant of the SS-11 "Sego" intercontinental ballistic missile with three to six re-entry warheads.

**Apocalyptic Prophecy.** How can we defend ourselves against such weapons? As one answer, we maintain large CW stockpiles of our own, including tons of agents located under our control in West Germany. But we are still vulnerable to the threat of Soviet-backed terrorists' using these horrific agents in America. So much more needs to be done:

1. Intelligence regarding chemical and biological weapons must be upgraded. All CBW agents used by the Soviets must be identified,

and defenses prepared against them.

2. As intelligence is gathered, it must be shared by all law-enforcement agencies. All thefts of deadly pathogens and chemical agents should be reported to a central information-gathering facility, perhaps at the FBI.

3. Two SWAT teams should be created, one each to deal with chemical and bacteriological threats by terrorists. A national serum bank should be established and stocked for use during massive epidemics.

4. The Customs Service, Defense and Commerce Departments should cut off any exports of chemical or biological agent precursors and gene-splicing information to Soviet-bloc countries.

5. The U.S. government must vigorously pursue verifiable chemical- and biological-weapons bans—along the lines of Vice President George Bush's chemical-weapons proposals to the Soviets last April. It should consider, along with other governments, the possibility of a nonproliferation treaty regarding CBW weapons.

We can no longer ignore the threat. We have had sufficient warning of a potential devastation so appalling that it would fulfill the plagues and pestilences in apocalyptic prophecy.